

Justice Anne Burke speaking on “Bishop Accountability” at the 2005 VOTF Indianapolis Convocation

Good afternoon. Many thanks for this opportunity to speak with you during this remarkable gathering.

Whenever I speak, of late, I am reminded of a prayer attributed to a 17th century nun whose wisdom, I believe, stretches beyond her own piety. Her words have power and importance for me. I hope they will have it for you.

“Lord, keep me from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject on every occasion.

Release me from the craving to straighten out everybody’s affairs.

Make me thoughtful but not moody; helpful but not bossy.

Seal my lips to my aches and pains. They are increasing, and the love of rehearsing them gets sweeter as the years go by.

Give me the ability to see good in unexpected places, and talents in unexpected people.

And give me, O Lord, the grace to tell them so.”

I know that my real passion for being with you today is so that I can exercise that grace and tell you of the goodness that you have unleashed upon the Church in our nation. You have been the catalysts of unexpected good. You have made it happen in unexpected places. Before the power of such goodness, we must name Who it is we see. Is it not the Lord, Who causes our hearts to burn, as the Gospels say? Is it not Him Who moves you to work for justice, openness and accountability in the Church? Is it not Him Who gathers and affirms you in this responsibility? And is it not Him Who keeps you at His table, telling the story of love to large to forget?

It is no secret that I am weary. I don’t need to give you a roadmap to that part of my life. Why is it whenever we seek to do something good for our Church, we come away frazzled, spent, wiped out and questioning our own sanity? Sadly, I do not see this in the Gospel. I cannot recall anywhere that records the community of believers gathering to discover new ways to shatter their idealism; fragment their best hopes; and stifle the bright ideas. Is that the difference between the Apostolic Church and the modern Church? This is not the post-Conciliar world I thought I would dwell in.

After the past three years of my work on the National Review Board, I find little to encourage my spirit, and dry dust to inspire my imagination. But I have learned to second-guess what I am told and always look for hidden agendas. What a remarkable legacy after what I saw in three years of service. Something is not right. I am not a cynic – I am too Irish to give in to such low feelings. But I am more suspicious, especially when I am dealing with the institutional power structure. I find it is a good idea to count my fingers and my toes after any dealings with officialdom.

I suspect that's why I am so anxious to be here with you. I really believe that if it were not for you, and particularly those VOTF members in Boston, the lid would not have blown off the issue of clerical abuse with the impact that it has. VOTF stood up to the shenanigans in Beantown and you would not let them go. If it were not for you, I am sure Cardinal Bernard Law would still be in Boston. But you made accountability the issue and the righteousness of the issue and the consequence of its truth forced him to acknowledge what he had done. This is no small thing. It sent shock waves through every cathedral in America. It sent a warning shot across the bow of every episcopal mansion in the USA. Even more important, it said that Catholics in the pews were mad as hell and they were not going to take it any longer. Accountability is the issue of this post-Conciliar age. Make no mistake about it – accountability is here to stay.

Accountability is not some half-baked, liberal issue. I believe it is a constituent part of Gospel living. It means not just being responsible – but being responsible to someone. Perhaps well-intentioned members of the hierarchy are too concerned about their accountability to God, Who often does not challenge them, rather than to the people of God who might be more responsive in their replies.

I hope you all recall the historical evolution of the standards of accountability that went into effect in 2002 after the bishops' meeting in Dallas. With their backs to the wall, I believe the USCCB was more than willing to bite the bullet and agree to what seemed a reasonable level of national accountability. New norms held them to a high level of scrutiny. These norms are sound, intelligent and, most of all, in place so that the criminality of the past is never repeated.

But as bishops around the country found some breathing room from public outrage, largely because of what members of the NRB were putting into place, some of them thought it was time to roll back the clock. Of course, we ran into individual roadblocks thrown up by individual bishops during some aspects of our investigations. But recently, some of those bishops set about to actually neuter the effectiveness of that accountability. During their recent meeting in Chicago, they even went so far as to attempt an in-house power play to “do in” the real meat of accountability. Of course, not only did these antics get leaked, but some were actually released to the press. During their executive session, saner heads prevailed and helped to restore the real spirit of those norms. But the very fact that as soon as the pressure is off them, some bishops rushed to erase the structures of accountability, does not portend that real trust has been re-established. What in the name of God are they thinking??

All I can say is, Do not let up! Keep your eyes peeled. Remain champions of accountability. Put Cardinal Law's picture on your refrigerator if you have to, but do not let up. Remember – it is not their Church or our Church, it is Christ's Church. Accountability from the hierarchy is a significant dimension for the measure of any episcopal government. I believe it is important to remember what started this in the first place. Who in their right mind wants to revisit that? Does the hierarchy believe that we will ever again permit our children to be victimized by pathetic abusers or irresponsible bishops who lack the good sense to act within the confines of civil law? I think not. That

day is over. We will no longer be afraid. It is time for them – those who exercise the leadership of disaster – to start being afraid. NO MORE VICTIMS. That is the policy all Americans must insist on.

As some dioceses face financial collapse; as Catholics in the pews draw lines in the sand; and as other Catholics walk away from the mess – the time is here to ensure it will not be business as usual. This is not a public relations problem. This is the greatest crisis in the history of the Church in our nation. And circling the wagons simply won't work for the bishops anymore.

Truthfulness, openness and responsibility should be the mottos on every episcopal seal. Anything less is merely the formula for disaster. We have been diminished by poor leadership and the criminal behavior of some. Demand accountability and keep wide your eyes. Sleep like the women of Jesus' parable, with lamps lit and one eye glued to the door. We do not know when he is coming – so be ready, and accountable. Nothing less will do.